3: Metraux E-5 (1933) 1939 SI7 Mataco SI7

primitiveness more accentuated than that of other tribes. They are among the dirtiest peoples of South America, and in the sense of cleanliness they are inferior to the Toba.

Matako material culture does not differ markedly from that of any of the other Chaco tribes. Their weapons are the same, their houses of the common beehive type, and their craftsmanship is hardly distinguishable from that of their neighbors. Judged outwardly, the Matako might be confused with the mass of Chaco cultures. A keen observer notices a slight superiority in the agriculture of the Matako,as compared with the Toba. The distinctive character of Matako culture may only be appreciated in contrast with that of the Toba-Pilagá. While the Matako are generally peaceful the Toba are warlike and have almost always been the conquerors in the far distant regions. However, it cannot be said that the Matako have not also fought bravely against their enemies or that they are lacking in military tradition. Still the contrast between them is striking even to an observer like myself who has spent only a short time among these Indians. The difference between these apparently identical cultures lies primarily in the stressing of religion and magic among the Matako in contrast with the relative unimportance of like interests among the Toba. Although built on the same pattern as that of the Toba, the culture of the Matako is interwoven with ceremonial activities, ritual dances, and expulsion of spirits. It is almost impossible to stay with a group of Matako more than one day without having the opportunity to attend some ceremony. The traditional blowing of medicine-men upon the sick occurs among the Matako as among other Chaco tribes. It is always associated with dances together with spells of magic and has rarely the individual character of the same ceremony among the Toba. Not only are the peformances of Matako medicine-men more impressive than those of other tribes in the same area, the external appearance of the medicine-man and his assistants denotes the great importance given to ritual details and

171 accessories. The performers wear red wool frontlets trimmed
105 with feathers on their heads, on their waists are feather belts, and rattles are tied on their feet. The magical power is attributed to every ornament, a belief less apparent among other Indians. So far as I know the Matako are the only Chaco tribe in which the medicine-men use narcotics. They use as snuff a powder made from the seeds of the *sebil* and through its use produce a state of trance during which their souls wander through the upper world. They wage collective war against disease and spirits and all of the ceremonies have a highly symbolical character. The Matako are very keen observers of taboos, mourning, for instance, is to them a very serious matter. This general interest in religion and the stress of religious beliefs in the native culture reveals itself in the Matako attitude toward Christianity. It is the general opinion of all of the missionaries with whom I discussed the question that the Matako are most eager to accept protestantism and that those who take the new faith do so seriously. They are not only interested in the exterior manifestations of religion, but they understand perfectly the moral problems and the subtilities of faith. The Matako who ask for baptism do so because they feel a genuine need for religion and the converted Indians do their best to adapt their living to new rules. The attitude of the Toba is quite different. They are amused by religion, they realize the help to be obtained from the missionaries, but they do not worry over much about the faith itself. They are light-hearted and and apathetic toward religion. The contrast between the two tribes has always impressed me and I noticed it immediately when I started to inquire about medicine-men. Information proffered by the Matako was always more detailed and extensive than that given by the Toba. The importance of religion to the Matako is not only revealed in spiritual crises; in the soul of a new convert modern religion affects his old life deeply.

000 I am aware that the ethnological material I gathered

Mataco Cultural Summary

Orientation

105 The Mataco (Mataguagos, Noctenes, or Huenneyei) are a small tribe of the Argentine-Bolivian Gran Chaco. The Mataco are similar in many respects to the other groups in the Chaco area, particularly the nearby Toba-Pilagá. The Mataco are notable particularly for their ceremonial life. Their language is closely related to Choroti.

The Chaco area is one of the most inhospitable in South America and has not been fully explored to this day. The climate is subtropical with considerable variation in rainfall and temperature. During the period of rains in the mountains the rivers may rise 20 or more feet above normal. The temperature frequently goes over 110° F. in the shade during this season. Despite the constant threat of floods and unbearable temperatures the Chaco itself gets little more than sporadic thundershowers during the "rainy" season and drought is the prime problem of the native agriculturalists. The western portion of the Chaco is covered with tropical rain forest, while the eastern portion is open scrub with patches of palms and other trees.

Pelleschi (599: 1896) reported an early missionary account that gave the figure of 20,000 for the Mataco. There are no figures available for the Mataco at present, but it is likely that a few thousand still survive.

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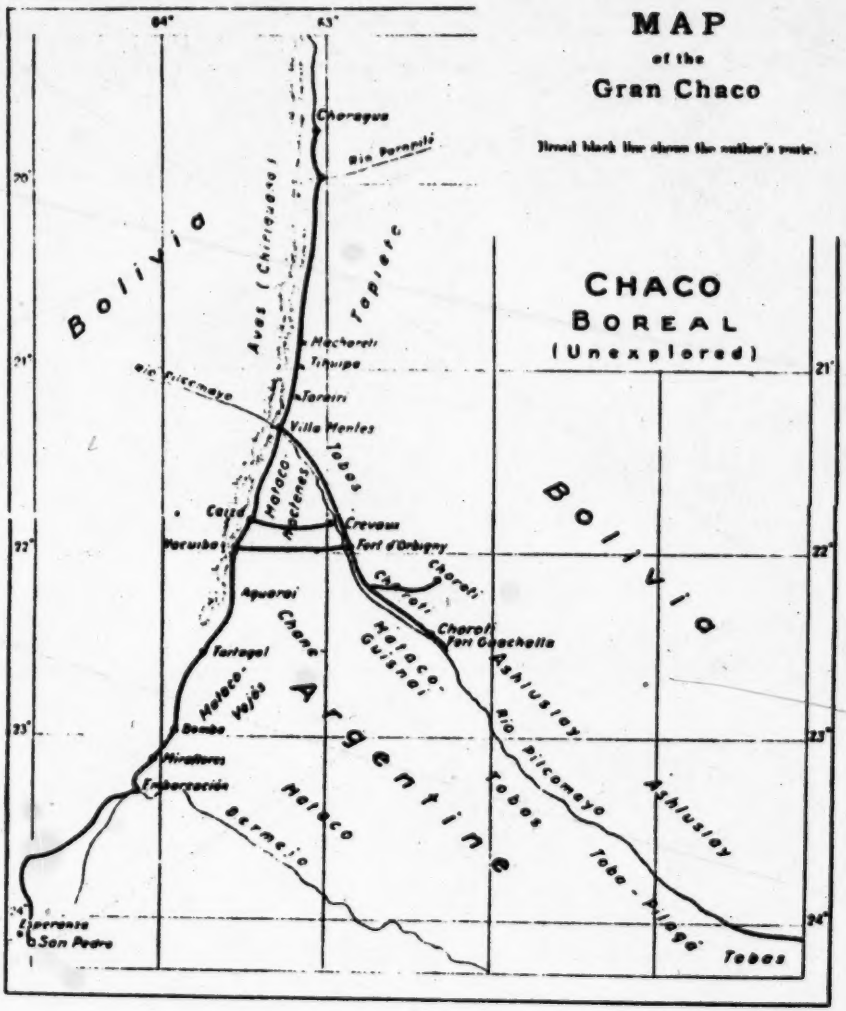

105 Karsten (28: 1932) described the Mataco as sturdy, slightly taller than the Choroti, and with coarse black hair, flat nose, and dark-brown eyes.

There are three Mataco groups. The northern Argentine group is called Vejós and is highly acculturated. The second group, called Mataco-Guisnay, lives on the right bank of the Pilcomayo south of Fortín Guachalla. The third group, called Mataco-Nocténes, occupies an area between Yaguiba, Villa Montes, and Crevaux and is the least acculturated. The Mataco have been more exposed to white contact than any other Chaco group. Despite initial culture shock they are among the most adaptable Indian groups on record.

Economy

The Mataco practice a very limited agriculture due in part to the unfavorable ecological situation. Squash is perhaps their most prominent crop plant. Beans, watermelon, manioc, and maize are also grown.

Far more important to the Mataco are the wild fruits, particularly the algarrobo, which may be fairly described as their staple. Algarrobo is preserved during the harvest season for later use. Various wild roots and seeds are also collected. Wild honey is avidly sought after.

• 105 Fishing, often with nets, is the single most important economic activity, with the occasional surplus dried and stored. Hunting is also practiced and tapir, deer, wild pig, and miscellaneous small animals are utilized.

Sheep, goats, and fowls are kept but do not have great economic importance.

Like most peoples who live primarily by hunting and gathering, the Mataco are accustomed to periods when little food is available, and to gorging themselves when a supply is found. Almost anything that moves or ever has moved is considered edible, although fish is the favorite.

The Mataco weave fabrics, nets, and baskets. Ceramics of good quality are made. Canoes are made from a single tree trunk with the aid of bone and shell tools. Stone is not available in the area for tool making.

Formerly the men did not wear even as much as a breech clout and the women wore only animal skins. Fabric jackets are now sometimes worn. A waist cloth is now the standard single item for men, with the addition of a blanket in cold weather. Women wear a sort of sarong with the body naked from the waist up except in areas of mission influence, where a loose gown has become standard. Children go entirely naked until the age of eight or ten.

Settlements

105 The aboriginal Mataco house is a circular hut built casually with saplings, canes, or whatever material is available, and covered with rushes, grass, or palm leaves. The huts must be entered on hands and knees and are too low for a man to stand upright. Contemporary natives build houses patterned after those of the white settlers.

A village consists of six to twelve of these structures arranged in a rough circle around an open area reserved for sheep and goats and for occasional games or ceremonials. Settlements are always located near a water supply and pasturage, as well as in proximity to a source of the wild fruits on which they depend. The entire settlement can be abandoned on short notice when conditions favor a move to another area. One reason for moving is when the vermin population becomes too oppressive for even the tolerant Mataco. Several deaths in a village will result in the whole place being put to the torch, and the entire group will move to a fresh area. Individual Mataco will also occasionally simply leave and join another group.

A village as a rule is composed of people who are related to one another. There is no real political authority. An elder who is considered unusually wise may have some authority over the village. When such a chief dies the village elders assemble and elect a new chief. In the event of hostilities with an outside group a war chief

105 for the village may be selected and in case of war involving several villages a council of allied chiefs may come into existence.

Acculturated Mataco villages have developed the cacique system. The cacique has very much more power than the aboriginal chiefs, particularly with regard to judiciary functions. The principal function of the chief at present is to act as agent for the tribe in dealings with the whites. The chief is also expected to mediate differences between local groups.

Religion

The Mataco, except for the mission natives, are pagan. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Mataco is their extraordinarily elaborate ceremonial and cosmological beliefs. The Mataco believe in an upper and lower world. The upper world has two compartments, the earth and the sky. The underworld is the abode of the dead. There is a great flood legend whose origin is uncertain.

One of the major ceremonial activities is prevention of disease. Tattooing with soot or ashes and bleeding and scarification are regarded as effective magic against disease. Sacred ornaments are also regarded as effective.

Diseases are regarded as the manifestations of evil spirits (nahút), and are most frequently believed to be the result of witchcraft.

105 Incantations, dancing, noise making, and sucking out the evil object are techniques of the shaman. Some herb medicines are used, most often in the form of poultices.

Spirits inhabit many natural objects, and plants and animals. There are in addition "free-floating" spirits which are associated with thunder and lightning, etc. Some of these spirits are good, others are evil.

At all ceremonial occasions such as weddings, dancing, drum playing, drinking, and chanting are part of the effort to drive off bad spirits. Prayers are also addressed to guardian spirits for supernatural aid.

A final type of ceremonial is that for ensuring good fishing, hunting, or harvest. The ceremonial to ensure the algaroba harvest is one of the most prominent.

Marriage

Villages are exogamous since most villagers are more or less closely related. Most marriages are contracted between persons from different villages of the same subtribe. Polygyny is rare. Girls are considered marriageable at twelve to fourteen and there is a marked shortage of marriageable females. Bride service is customary. Residence is at the bride's family until the bride service is completed, and then the couple may move to the husband's

105 village. Following the birth of a child, residence is matrilocal. The mother of the prospective bride has the final authority as to the choice of a husband.

Wives are subject to beatings from their husbands if they are caught in illicit affairs. This, however, seems to have little effect, since Mataco women are apt to have at least one lover. Unfaithfulness may lead to divorce, but since women are scarce such activity is sometimes overlooked.

Kinship

Descent, according to Karsten (49: 1932), is matrilineal, though the father's relatives are recognized. Terminology is of the Hawaiian type. The mother's family is the primary relationship group, and men are identified with their wife's clan, if married, and with their mother's if single.

Life Cycle

The Mataco woman is traditionally the more aggressive sexually. Premarital sex is fairly open and quite permissive. Girls who have had sexual intercourse the night before paint their faces red. Sex during marriage has several taboos associated. For example, couples are supposed to abstain from sexual activity from the time a child is born until it has teeth.

105 Infanticide and abortion are practiced by unmarried females.

At childbirth, the mother is assisted by a midwife and the father. The Mataco practice a limited form of the couvade, that is, the father does not go to bed, but is expected to refrain from any sort of activity.

Many complicated ceremonials are utilized following childbirth to ward off evil from the mother and child. Names are bestowed by the father when the child is one to three years old. These names often stem from dreams.

Children are allowed considerable freedom and are often carried about by the mother. Infants are breast fed until about one year and are then gradually weaned. Children are rarely punished or reprimanded.

No particular ceremony is attached to boys attaining puberty, but girls are the center of feasts, dances, beer-drinking, and religious rituals when their first menstruation occurs.

Children are trained by observing the activities of their elders, especially in fishing and hunting.

Sexual relationships and marriage have been outlined above.

The attainment of majority is recognized with the insertion of wooden plugs into slots in the ears.

The elderly are regarded as having special magical powers. The old are generally well-treated though early accounts say that the

105 elderly, along with cripples, were often left behind or even killed.

Conclusion

The Mataco have a relatively primitive culture, based on hunting and gathering. They have a meager material culture since as semi-nomads they do not accumulate possessions. Their ceremonial is fairly elaborate, however, for a people in this stage of development. They had, aboriginally, an almost complete lack of political integration even at the village level. Modern influences have led to a modification of this political and social pattern.

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